

Ancien Régime: the society of privileges; the Estates society

Introduction

The static and rigid structure of society in the *Ancien Régime* made any change in social position practically impossible. Social hierarchy was based on privilege. This social model extended throughout Europe from the Middle Ages on, originating in feudalism and predominating until the French Revolution and the XIX Century. Studying this social structure is important, therefore, to understand our History.

In this activity we will analyse its characteristics and try to re-enact the life of the aristocracy, particularly during the XVIII century, looking as well at some of its symbols such as Marie Antoinette. Using extensive graphic information, students will reach conclusions regarding the estates organisation and do some comparison work regarding the society they live in today.

Objectives

- Revise basic concepts of the *Ancien Régime*.
- Analyse the features of the Estates Society in the *Ancien Régime*.
- Depict the life and habits of the nobility during the *Ancien Régime*, as well as some features of the other estates.
- Extract information from images and paintings of the time.
- Reach conclusions make well-founded judgements and establish comparisons with contemporary life.

Competences

- Ability to extract information and reach conclusions as from images and artistic works.
- Ability to write brief texts as from varied sources.

Linguistic competences

- Express situations that occurred in the past. Use the past simple and other past tenses.
- Make brief descriptions and use connectors.

Assessment criteria

	D 20–40%	C 40–60%	B 60–80%	A 80–100%
Content-related activities	Does not engage in activities, or does only some.	Engages in activities, but makes some mistakes.	Engages in activities, getting most of them right.	Engages in all activities making few or no mistakes.
Applying Contents	Does not answer questions, does not participate in the final assignment.	Answers questions, participates in the final assignment, with some mistakes.	Answers questions, suitable participation in the final assignment.	Answers all questions, participates in the final assignment with originality and without mistakes.
Use of language	Merely copies.	Understands instructions and gives sensible answers.	Understands instructions, uses past expressions.	Understands instructions, uses past expressions accurately.
Accuracy and following instructions	Very untidy and hard to understand.	Untidy, but can be understood.	Follows instructions, makes mistakes.	Very clear, follows instructions perfectly.

Activity development

Materials:

- Ballpoint pens
- Sheets of paper/notebook

Timing and implementation in the classroom:

One session of 40–50 minutes in the classroom:

- Introducing the topic and activities: 5–10 minutes
- Activity 1: 5–10 minutes
- Activity 2: 15 minutes
- Final task: 10 minutes
- Extension activity: 5 minutes

Introducing the topic and the activities (10 minutes)

The *Ancien Régime* was the established political, economic and social system in France before the Revolution in 1789. This system was common throughout Europe, with some insignificant differences. Politically, absolute monarchy retained all the power. The economy was dependent on agriculture and some crafts.

The social system had been static since the Middle Ages, its origins being in the medieval 'three orders' or 'estates', 'estate' meaning a social class (origin: Latin). The First Estate was the Clergy, comprising those who belonged to the church: their social role was praying. The Second Estate consisted of the nobility, normally landowners: their social role was fighting. The Third Estate comprised everyone else, namely peasants: their role was working. To refer to the three estates, Latin terms were used: 'oratores', 'bellatores' and 'laboratores', meaning pray-ers, fighters and workers.

This social structure remained almost unchanged until the French Revolution in 1789, although it had already begun to break down in urban areas where merchants, craftsmen and other independent workers searched for a new society, based on money and work instead of on privileges.

Before exploring this topic further, remind yourself of some basic concepts:

Estates: in the Middle Ages and Early Modern period, these were different population groups with varying social situations and roles. Certain Estates enjoyed privileges (such as tax-exemption), whilst others did not.

Privileges: the advantages held by certain population groups within the prevailing social and economic climate. Privileges tended to be passed down through the family, and would be held until death.

Useful links

- An excellent summary of 'Estates' society before the French Revolution.
<http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwart/engl430/estates.html>
- What is the Third Estate? Excerpts from the Sieyes text.
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sieyes.asp>

Answer key

Activity 1: Describing society under the Ancien Régime

Look at picture A. It shows three people in conversation, dressed in medieval costumes.

1. Who is represented on the left? How do you know? *A peasant (Third Estate). He is carrying an agricultural tool.*
2. Who is represented in the middle? How do you know? *A knight or a nobleman. He is wearing armour.*
2. Who is represented on the right? How do you know? *A member of the Church (or clergy). He is dressed as a monk.*

Now look at picture B. Again, three people are depicted.

1. What do they represent? *The Three Estates.*
2. Who are the people on top? *A nobleman and a priest.*
3. Who is underneath the two people? What is he doing? *A peasant. He is carrying the nobleman and the priest on his back.*

4. Write a short description of the picture. *We can see three people: two of them are well-dressed and they are sitting on the third person's back. He is not so well-dressed and he is trying to walking using a stick.*
5. What idea is presented by the picture? *The picture probably shows how peasants (the Third Estate) maintained the two privileged Estates, the nobility and the clergy.*

Activity 2: The three Estates and their everyday life; the role of the third Estate

1. Which Estate is represented by the pictures? *Nobility (or aristocracy).*
2. Which activities are they involved in in picture A? And in picture B?
A: Playing music, looking at the landscape through the window, wearing fine clothes.
B: Dancing and playing with toys.
3. Are they well-dressed? What are they wearing? *Yes, they are. Luxurious and colourful clothes.*
4. Is the life depicted in the pictures hard? Why (not)? *Not at all. They had no work to do and they enjoyed their lives.*

Now look at the picture of Cardinal Richelieu below (picture C).

1. How is he dressed: as a nobleman or as a peasant? *He is dressed as a nobleman.*
2. What is his role in society, according to this painting? *A very important role.*
3. Is it similar to the nobility's role? Give reasons for your answer. *Yes it is a very similar role, because both of them belong to the privileged Estates and they rule society.*

Now look at this picture depicting peasant life and answer the questions below (picture D).

1. What are they doing? *They are working in the fields.*
2. Are all of them doing the same thing? *Yes, all of them are working.*
3. Are there women in the picture? What are they doing? *Yes, there are some. They are working too.*
4. What is the role of peasants in society, according to this picture? *Working hard.*

Read the text for an insight into the true situation of the Third Estate (peasants, merchants and many others). Then answer the questions.

1. According to Sieyes, why was the noble order so powerful and significant in the French society of the *Ancien Régime*? *Because they had privileges and they were very well represented at the Assembly.*
2. Why were the nobles not representatives of the whole nation? *Because they only defended the particular interests of nobles.*
3. Who belonged to the Third Estate? *Most of the population of France.*
4. What is the main idea presented in the text? Why is Sieyes complaining? *The nation is not well represented. The Third Estate is the nation.*

Final task: The life of a noble roundtable

Free answers. Students should use past tenses and write about the nobles' activities in their everyday life.

Extension activity

Free answers. Students should introduce their ideas using 'from my point of view', 'according to the picture', etc., and they should try to compare the nobles' and upper classes' life. Students should particularly show how inequality is still a characteristic of western societies.

Worksheet

Ancien Régime: the society of privileges; the Estates society

Activity 1: Describing society under the Ancien Régime

Look at picture A. It shows three people in conversation, dressed in medieval costumes.

1. Who is represented on the left? How do you know?

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2. Who is represented in the middle? How do you know?

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3. Who is represented on the right? How do you know?

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A



<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/c/cd/Cleric-Knight-Workman.jpg/585px-Cleric-Knight-Workman.jpg>

Now look at picture B. Again, three people are depicted.

1. What do they represent?

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2. Who are the people on top?

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3. Who is underneath the two people? What is he doing?

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4. Write a short description of the picture.

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5. What idea is presented by the picture?

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B



http://www.lasalle.es/santanderapuntes/historia_2/webs_historia/caricaturas/antiguoregimen_03.jpg

Worksheet

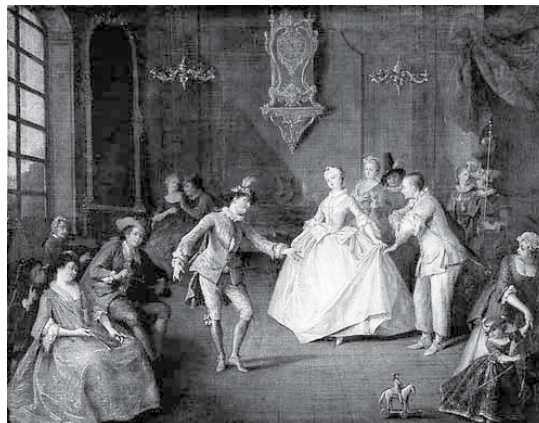
Activity 2: The three Estates and their everyday life; the role of the Third Estate

Look at these pictures and answer the questions below.

A



B



<http://www.arthermitage.org/ConstantWauters/Actors-Before-a-Performance.big.jpg>

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1a/Cardinal_Richelieu_%28Champagne%29.jpg

1. Which Estate is represented by the pictures?

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2. Which activities are they involved in in picture A? And in picture B?

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3. Are they well-dressed? What are they wearing?

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.....

4. Is the life depicted in the pictures hard? Why (not)?

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Worksheet

Now look at the picture of Cardinal Richelieu below (picture C).

1. How is he dressed: as a nobleman or as a peasant?

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2. What is his role in society, according to this painting?

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3. Is it similar to the nobility's role? Give reasons for your answer.

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C



http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1a/Cardinal_Richelieu_%28Champaigne%29.jpg

Now look at this picture depicting peasant life and answer the questions below (picture D).

1. What are they doing?

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2. Are all of them doing the same thing?

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3. Are there women in the picture? What are they doing?

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4. What is the role of peasants in society, according to this picture?

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D



Worksheet

Read the following text for an insight into the true situation of the Third Estate (peasants, merchants and many others). Then answer the questions.

What is a nation? A body of associates, living under a common law, and represented by the same legislature, etc.

Is it not evident that the noble order has privileges and expenditures which it dares to call its rights, but which are apart from the rights of the great body of citizens? (...)

In regard to its political rights, these also it exercises apart. It has its special representatives, which are not charged with securing the interests of the people. The body of its deputies sit apart; and when it is assembled in the same hall with the deputies of simple citizens, it is none the less true that its representation is essentially distinct and separate: it is a stranger to the nation, in the first place, by its origin, since its commission is not derived from the people; then by its object, which consists of defending not the general, but the particular interest.

The Third Estate embraces then all that which belongs to the nation; and all that which is not the Third Estate, cannot be regarded as being of the nation.

What is the Third Estate?

It is the whole.

Emmanuel Joseph Sieyes, *What is the Third Estate?* [Excerpts]

1. According to Sieyes, why was the noble order so powerful and significant in the French society of the *Ancien Régime*?

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2. Why were the nobles not representatives of the whole nation?

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3. Who belonged to the Third Estate?

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4. What is the main idea presented in the text? Why is Sieyes complaining?

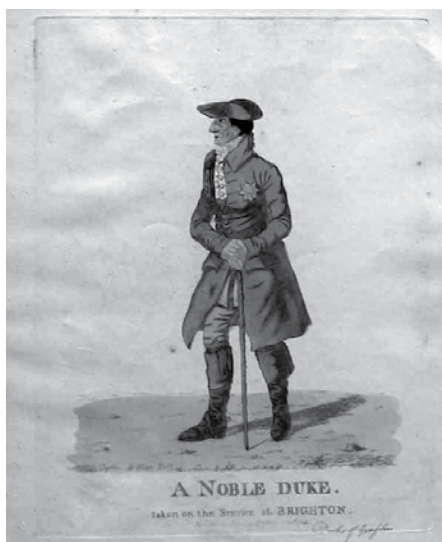
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Worksheet

Final task: The life of a noble roundtable

Working in groups of four, review what you have learned previously and look at the picture below. As a group, you are going to write the life story of the man depicted. The first line is given as an example. Each member of the group will continue the text by writing a short paragraph about the man. You should take no more than two minutes to write each paragraph. Then pass the paper on to the next group member, who will write the next section of text. Continue until everyone in the group has had a turn. The group member who wrote the first paragraph will also write the last one. When you have finished, choose a spokesperson to read your text out loud to the rest of the class.

Remember to use past tenses in your life story.



<http://www.heatons-of-tisbury.co.uk/images/dighton/noble.jpg>

My name is William of Gloucester, Duke of Brighton ...

Student 1's text

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Student 2's text

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Student 3's text

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Student 4's text

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Student 5's text

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